

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES

CHILDREN'S DIVISION

P. O. BOX 88

JEFFERSON CITY, MO

May 12, 2006

MEMORANDUM**What's Inside:**

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- FST Role in Preserving Sibling Ties
- Sibling Administrative Reviews

TO: REGIONAL EXECUTIVE STAFF, CIRCUIT MANAGERS, AND
CHILDREN'S DIVISION STAFF

FROM: PAULA NEESE, INTERIM DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: PARENTAL AND SIBLING VISITATION
FAMILY SUPPORT TEAM (FST) ROLE IN PRESERVING
SIBLING TIES
SIBLING ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEWS

REFERENCE: CHILDREN'S DIVISION

DISCUSSION:

The purpose of this memorandum is to introduce policy enhancements to the Child Welfare Manual that assist in preserving the bond and connection between a parent and child(ren) and amongst siblings through placement and on-going family visitation.

In May of 2005, the Children Division (CD) formed a visitation workgroup to review its policies and practices that impact visitation and safety throughout its continuum of care. The visitation workgroup was represented by individuals of various levels from throughout the state. The visitation workgroup concluded, by providing the Executive Management team with a report detailing its findings and recommendations. As a result of these recommendations, policy enhancements and practice changes are being implemented to improve safety, well-being, and achieve permanency for children served by the Children's Division. **This memorandum is the second in a series to address visitation.**

Visitation

Visitation is a critical element in timely reunification. Children have a right to have regular visits with his/her birth parents, siblings, and other significant others to whom the child has ties (Section 1, Chapter 2.4). Visitation assists in preserving family, cultural and community connections. Importantly, visitation assists in keeping the child in their parents mind, provides an opportunity for parents to practice and demonstrate their

parental skills, and allows the individual supervising the visit to observe parental skills in action. Visitation plans provide a framework for ensuring that quality visits occur between children in out-of-home care and their families, and other persons whom the child(ren) may have ties.

The standards for visitation are meant to enhance and increase visitation beyond the minimum required. These standards should be considered in the FST when developing and reviewing the visitation plan. The Children's Service Worker is responsible for ensuring that a visitation plan is developed and in place, which should occur at the first FST meeting. A plan may be in place to address parental and sibling visitation separately. However, this does not prevent either visit from occurring on the same day in the same setting.

At no time should a parental and/or sibling visits be cancelled or rescheduled because of unexpected situations with the CSW's schedule, a back-up plan should be in place. When unexpected situations occur with the CSW's schedule, the Circuit/County should assign another CD staff person to the visit to ensure that the visit is held as scheduled. However, parental or other extenuating circumstances may cause a visit to be cancelled such as illness. The FST should be utilized to coordinate for transportation, as transportation alone should not prevent visitation between siblings. Parental and sibling visitation should occur unless such visits are deemed contrary to the welfare of the child by the Family Support Team (FST)/Permanency Planning Review Team (PPRT) and documented as such, or if prohibited by the Court.

A Visitation plan should include, but not be limited, to the following:

- Who can and cannot participate in visits, i.e. siblings, kin, family friends, and other persons that the child has significant attachment;
- How to assure safety during visits;
- Whether or not visits will be supervised, if so by whom;
- Frequency of visits;
- Location of visits;
- Transportation to/from visits;
- Schedule and duration of visits;
- Visitation activities;
- Emergency, cancellation and rescheduling procedures;
- Responsibilities of the CSW, parent, placement provider, GAL/CASA, or other appropriate persons;
- Any special conditions affecting visitation; and
- Consideration for increased sibling visitation beyond the current minimum of one (1) time per month if siblings are not placed together.

The Supervised Visitation Checklist (CD-86) should be completed by the individual supervising the visit and submitted to the assigned CSW within three (3) days of the visit. The parent and child (if age appropriate) are to be provided the Visitation Reaction Form (CD-85), which is a two-part form that records the parent and/or child's reaction to the visit. The original part of this form should be submitted to CSW within three (3) days of the visit. Each county office will receive an initial supply of the Visitation Reaction Form (CD-85) from the warehouse. Thereafter, any additional forms need to be ordered directly from the warehouse. The CD-86 is available on the Children's Division E-forms

page. **The CD-85 and CD-86 should be kept in the FCOOHC case file in the assessment and treatment services section.**

Parental Visitation

Visits between a parent and child are essential, specifically when the goal is to reunify the child with his/her parents. Visits with parents may lessen the trauma of separation for the child, remind the child that his/her parent cares, and may reassure the parent that his/her child is being provided appropriate care by the Children's Division. **It is recommended that a visit between a parent and child occur weekly or as frequently as possible in efforts to preserve the bond between a parent and child. Efforts should be made to include non-custodial parents in visitation.** While it is expected that the CSW will be prepared for a scheduled visit, often parents are not prepared. The CSW should assist in preparing the parent(s) by discussing the following:

- What the parent expects to accomplish during the visit;
- How to assure safety during visits;
- How the parent feels about the visit;
- Possible feelings the child(ren) may have about the visit;
- Activities to occur or avoid during the visit;
- The impact on the child when visits do or do not occur; and
- What could cause a visit to end.

Sibling Visitation

Sibling visitation assists in preserving the sibling relationship, bond and family connection. Visitation provides an opportunity for siblings to support each other during their time of separation, which may lessen the trauma for the child. **It is recommended that visits occur weekly as possible, with a minimum of one (1) time per month.**

When planning activities for **siblings**, consideration should be given to the children's age, developmental needs, schedules and routines, i.e. school. Examples of sibling activities to maintain sibling connections, include but are not limited to the following, sharing child care providers (when possible), joint counseling sessions (if appropriate), working on life books together, sleepovers, celebration of birthdays, holidays, attending school events, writing and calling each other.

Sibling Placement

Children have an inherent right to maintain their sibling relations and live with their siblings, whenever possible. The Children's Division (CD) is committed to ensuring that siblings are placed together and/or that visitation occurs amongst siblings. The sibling relationship in placement can serve as a source of safety, security and promote a sense of well-being during a child's placement in out-of-home care. The placement of siblings together preserves a child's connection to his/her family and environment. The placement of siblings should be a priority in the case planning process. **Sibling placement can positively impact placement stability and assist in reducing the loss and trauma a child may have from being removed from his/her home and everyday environment.**

When siblings are separated, the task of being placed back together can be a challenge. CSWs are faced with the challenge of finding placement providers who are able and willing to provide placement for sibling groups. CSWs are to work with their Family Support Team members in ensuring that siblings are placed together, siblings remain placed together and that visitation occurs, whenever children are not placed together.

The CD's responsibilities include making a good faith effort to identify and recruit persons who are willing to provide placement to sibling groups in an effort to maintain and preserve sibling and family connections. It is critical that diligent efforts are made to identify and locate parents and/or relatives who may be able to provide placement for the sibling group.

FST Role in Preserving Sibling Ties

The CSW is not alone in making the decision to separate siblings; such decisions should be made in conjunction with the Family Support Team (FST)/ Permanency Planning Review Team (PPRT). These team meetings serve as a vehicle for ensuring that all available placement options and services are explored in efforts to either maintain and/or place siblings together.

Note: For the purpose of this discussion, the term FST will be used, but this does not preclude such decisions being made through a PPRT, if certain criteria are met. (See memorandum CD06-39.)

The primary purpose of placing the sibling group together should be discussed during the FST; this discussion should include, but is not limited to the following:

- To preserve the sibling relationship and bond;
- Provide support and healing during a time of separation from their family and home; and
- Provide support for one another during their time of crisis and change.

An FST is to be held prior to the separation of siblings. The FST should determine whether sibling separation is in the best interest of the child. The FST should consider the age and developmental needs of each child, their attachment and emotional bond to one another and the effects separation will have on the siblings. Separations may result due to the following:

- A child has a special need for therapeutic services, which may not be available in the proposed sibling placement;
- A child has inflicted physical, sexual, or emotional abuse on a sibling;
- Court ordered separation;
- Half-sibling placed with a biological parent/relative;
- Large group of siblings are placed with two relatives and contact can be maintained; and
- Inability to find a placement provider that will take all the children.

When the FST has determined that a sibling group can not reside in the same household, the following options for placement preference should be considered:

- Placement in the same town/community;
- When placed in the same town/community, continue in the same school setting;
- Placement in the same geographic region;
- Placement in a setting where the placement provider will encourage and facilitate frequent and meaningful contact.

The CSW **should** document on the CS-1 that reasonable efforts were made to place the sibling group with the same placement provider and why such placement was not possible.

Sibling Administrative Review

Circuit Managers, along with the appropriate regional staff, will conduct administrative reviews within 30 days of sibling separation to address sibling placement. The purpose of this review is to evaluate whether all viable placement options have been explored and exhausted in efforts to reunite siblings, review the impact of such separation on the child's well-being, and determine whether FST meetings are continuing to pursue potential placement providers for the sibling group. Recommendations from the sibling administrative review will be provided and/or discussed with the assigned worker and his/her supervisor. The CSW **should** consult with the FST to incorporate the recommendations into the case plan. The Circuit Manager, along with the appropriate regional staff, **should** conduct these reviews every 30 days thereafter, until the sibling group has been placed together, unless circumstances dictate otherwise.

Additionally, Central Office will be conducting its own administrative review of separated siblings. The purpose of this review is to evaluate whether all viable placement options have been explored and exhausted in efforts to reunite siblings, review the impact of such separation on the child's well-being, and determine whether FST meetings are continuing to pursue potential placement providers for the sibling group. The summary and recommendations of the Central Office sibling administrative review **should** be shared with the Regional Administrator, Circuit Manager, and the assigned worker and supervisor.

As a child and family serving agency, we are committed and embrace the opportunity to work to maintain parental and sibling relationships for children in our care and custody. These policy changes meet Program Improvement Plan requirements and are consistent with standards set forth by the Council of Accreditation. Your efforts are appreciated in working to preserve sibling ties.

NECESSARY ACTION:

1. Review this memorandum with all Children's Division staff.
2. Review revised Child Welfare Manual chapters as indicated below.
3. All questions should be cleared through normal supervisory channels and directed to:

PDS CONTACT: Alicia Jenkins 573-751-0311 Alicia.Jenkins@dss.mo.gov	PROGRAM MANAGER: Kathryn Sapp 573-522-5062 Kathryn.Sapp@dss.mo.gov
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CHILD WELFARE MANUAL REVISIONS: Section 1, Chapter 1 Section 4, Chapter 4 Section 4, Chapter 7 Section 4, Chapter 7, Attachment A Section 4, Chapter 7, Attachment D Section 7, Glossary/Reference Table of Contents
FORMS AND INSTRUCTIONS: CD-85 Visitation Reaction Form CD-86 Supervised Visitation Checklist
REFERENCE DOCUMENTS and RESOURCES: N/A.
RELATED STATUTE: N/A.
ADMINISTRATIVE RULE: N/A.
COUNCIL ON ACCREDITATION (COA) STANDARDS: N/A.
PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT PLAN (PIP): P1.6.3 Expand use of FST meetings to promote placement stability. P1.7.2 Improve quality of FSTs to ensure permanency goal is established and reviewed. P1.8.4 Improve quality of FSTs to assure review of permanency goal P2.12.1 Increase number of siblings placed together. P2.13.1 Increase frequency and quality of parent/child and sibling visits. WB1.19.1 Develop policy addressing quality of visits to incorporate case planning, service delivery and goal attainment.
SACWIS REQUIREMENTS: N/A.

PN/AJ